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ABSTRACT

This study investigated family characteristics as risk factors for sexual abuse by examining the family environments of both abused and nonabused young adults as assessed by the Family Environment Scale. Participants were college students (N=230) at a major southeastern university. A total of 105 students reported sexual experiences which occurred before the age of 18 with persons at least five years older. A comparison group of 125 nonabused participants was matched to the victim group on age, race, marital status, and socioeconomic status. Nonvictims reported greater cohesion and organization for their families than did victims. Significant differences were not found between the single-incident victims' families and the multiple-incidents victims' families for either cohesion or organization. Failure to find the predicted differences between families of single- and multiple- incident victims suggests the risk of initial occurrence of sexual abuse but that other factors may determine whether abuse continues. Alternatively, cohesion and organization may not represent true risk factors for sexual abuse; instead they may perhaps be simply correlates of sexual abuse and/or characteristics of dysfunctional families. (ABL)

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# Family Environments of Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse: Single- vs. Multiple-Incident Victims

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Family Environments of Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse: Single - vs. Multiple-Incident Victims

Recent research on the characteristics of families of victims of childhood sexual abuse suggests at least two reasons that the study of victim families may be important. First, there is evidence (Townsley, Jackson, Edison, Burke, Messner & Shipp, 1987) that family variables make a contribution to the later psychological adjustment of victims that is independent of the contribution of sexual abuse alone. Second, differences in characteristics of families of victims as compared to nonvictims suggest that certain family characteristics may represent risk factors for the occurrence of sexual abuse (Finkelhor, 1980; Jackson, Calhoun, Amick, Maddever & Habif, 1986).

The present study was designed to further investigate family characteristics as risk factors for sexual abuse by examining the family environments of both abused and nonabused young adults as assessed by the Family Environment Scale (FES; Moos, Insel & Humphrey, 1974). Based on the findings of Finkelhor (1980) and on anecdotal reports in the literature, low levels of family cohesion and organization were hypothesized to increase the risk of child sexual abuse. Thus, it was predicted that families of victims would be described as less cohesive and as being less well organized than families of nonvictims. Further, it was hypothesized that the less cohesive and organized the family the greater the likelihood that sexual abuse would continue to occur over a period of time. Therefore, families of individuals who experienced multiple incidents of sexual abuse were predicted to display less cohesion and organization than families of individuals who experienced a single abusive incident.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were introductory psychology students at a major southeastern university. A total of 105 students (86 women; 19 men) reported sexual experiences which occurred before the age of 18 with persons at least five years older. A comparison group of 125 nonabused participants (97 women; 28 men) was matched to the victim group on age, race, marital status, and SES. The combined sample had an average age of 19 years and was predominantly white, unmarried and from families of upper middle class social standing.

### Procedure

Participants met in groups of 35-45 students and completed the following self-report instruments along with several additional instruments not used in the present study.

Past Experiences Questionnaire (PEQ). The PEQ was developed by one of the investigators for use in studies of child sexual abuse. The instrument contains questions on participant demographic characteristics and childhood sexual experiences with older persons.

Family Environment Scale (FES). The 90-item FES (Moos, Insel & Humphrey, 1974) consists of ten subscales assessing the relationship, system maintenance, and personal growth dimensions of family environments. For purposes of the present study only scores on the cohesion and organization subscales were used. Temporal and internal consistency of the FES subscales have been found to be adequate, and support for subscale validities is provided by Moos et al. (1974).

## Results

The hypotheses concerning differences between family environments of nonvictims, single-incident victims, and multiple-incident victims were tested by means of a one-way analysis of variance. Significant differences were found on both the cohesion, $F(2,227) = 4.21$, $p < .02$, and organization scales, $F(2,227) = 4.62$, $p < .01$. Duncan's Multiple Range Tests revealed that the significant differences existed between the families of victims and nonvictims. Nonvictims reported greater cohesion and organization for their families than did victims. Significant differences were not found, however, between the single-incident victims' families and the multiple-incident victims' families for either cohesion or organization (see Table 1).

## Discussion

The present results yielded mixed support for the hypotheses. The hypotheses that the family environments of single-incident victims would differ in levels of cohesion and organization from those of multiple-incident victims was not supported; however, the hypothesis that the family environments of nonvictims would be characterized by greater cohesion and organization than those of victims was supported.

The finding of greater cohesion in nonvictims' families is generally consistent with the results of other recent literature. For example, in a study of incest, Jackson et al. (1986) found that victims reported lower cohesion than nonvictims for their family environment. Townsley et al. (1987) also reported that less cohesion existed in the families of women who were sexually abused as children than in the families of nonvictims. The significant difference found for the organization scale between families of victims and nonvictims is also interesting but has

not been previously reported. This variable thus appears worthy of further study.

Failure to find the predicted differences between families of single- and multiple-incident victims suggests that relatively low levels of cohesion and organization may serve to increase the risk of initial occurrence of sexual abuse but that other factors (e.g., the relationship of the perpetrator to the victim) may determine whether abuse continues. Alternatively, cohesion and organization may not represent true risk factors for sexual abuse; instead they may perhaps be simply correlates of sexual abuse and/or characteristics of dysfunctional families in general. Further research will be necessary to elucidate more clearly the relationship of these family characteristics to sexual abuse.

Table 1

Mean Family Environment Scale Scores

| | Family Characteristics | |
|---|---|---|
| | Cohesion | Organization |
| Nonvictims | 53.95<br>(12.44) | 52.93<br>(10.90) |
| Single-Incident Victims | 48.92<br>(15.34) | 48.44<br>(12.38) |
| Multiple-Incident Victims | 48.39<br>(15.15) | 48.27<br>(11.44) |

Note. Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations.

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